



## VOREC COVID-19 Special Report to the Governor: Addendum

July 30, 2020

### Executive Summary

Since the VOREC steering committee and VOBA offered COVID-impact “sector snapshots” and recommendations to the Governor in May, the Outdoor Recreation sector, including both for- and non-profit businesses as well as public land managers, has continued to experience high interest in participation in many outdoor recreation activities. The impact of COVID-19, both past, present and future, is on everyone’s mind.

In the last report, VOREC steering committee members and VOBA recommended a slow re-opening to tourism, with the goal of keeping Vermont’s success with low transmission rates in line with our need for tourist-related business. The committee is pleased with the overall effort and guidance from the Governor’s office but has some additional thoughts to offer, reflecting developments since the initial report.

In addition, the VOREC steering committee discussed how the outdoor recreation industry in Vermont can support diversity, equity and inclusion efforts, specifically for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) Communities. The committee has resolved to apply a lens of diversity, equity, and inclusion to their work, and they recommend that Vermont/VOREC:

- Extend eligibility for VOREC grants to affinity groups (groups that provide safe and supportive environments for marginalized communities) to provide outdoor recreation programs in Vermont (out of state entities would be eligible).
- Work with businesses and affinity/recreation groups to expand the First Time Happy Camper program to increase participation of BIPOC populations in a variety of outdoor recreation activities in Vermont.
- When slots on the VOREC steering committee open up, use these opportunities for bringing more women, minorities, youth, veterans, people with different abilities, Black, Indigenous and People of Color, among others, to the initiative.
- Review and modify the VOREC Charter for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion impact
- Overall, the VOREC steering committee requires diversity, equity and inclusion training and other learning opportunities and recommends working with the Racial Equity Director or other appropriate staff to develop this commitment.

### COVID-19 Outdoor Recreation Recommendations:

In summary, through discussion at the most recent VOREC steering committee meeting and in a follow-up survey, steering committee members recommended that:

- Additional marketing and messaging capacity be directed to outdoor recreation opportunities, stewardship, and COVID-19 health and safety guidance for out-of-state visitors, as many locations are experiencing high use by out of state visitors who do not wear masks or practice social distancing.
- A working group be formed to support the use of outdoor facilities on school campus locations, and on state, other public lands, and privately owned forestlands for public school and camp outdoor education programming to provide a safe learning environment while connecting youth to the outdoors. With school re-opening plans rolling out, parents and organizations are searching for outdoor options and there is high interest for both in-school and remote-day options.
- A task force with outdoor recreation business representation be put in place to inform policies/mandates to prevent the possibility of a future shutdown as well as to plan for one to support preparation by businesses and nonprofits, curtailing of recreation options, and safety measures for Vermonters and visitors
- Outdoor recreation stewardship is enhanced and promoted in response to increased participation
- Recognition of the importance of municipal parks and recreation departments and programs for providing essential services such as childcare, food access and healthy outdoor activity opportunities.

Below, please find the further recommendations the steering committee offers in response to COVID-19:

## Outdoor Recreation and Tourism Marketing:

- In a survey, all VOREC steering committee respondents **recommend that the Governor assign a VOREC presence to the \$5 million marketing Vermont effort at the Department of Tourism and Marketing**, and that VOREC foster a connection with the Chief Marketing Office for opportunities to raise awareness about stewardship
- **Create a messaging campaign about Vermont’s stewardship ethic and the public health and wellness benefits of outdoor recreation:** explore the possibility of using COVID-related grant funding for this campaign
- Integrate practical and clear guidance about COVID-19 social expectations into tourism and marketing efforts: a “Keep Vermont Healthy” campaign for visitors.
  - Quarantine information isn’t well understood, followed, or practical: consider more efforts targeted to people who come to Vermont without having followed those requirements. The messages should include:
    - Do not travel if you or your household is sick
    - Wearing masks is expected in any public setting (several steering committee members asked for a “Mask Mandate” from the Governor)
    - Practice social distancing in all settings

## Outdoor Classrooms:

- VOREC steering committee members are highly supportive of **using outdoor facilities on school campus locations, and on state, other public lands, and privately owned forestlands**

**for public school and camp outdoor education programming to provide a safe learning environment while connecting youth to the outdoors.**

- Stand up a working group to support school-sponsored outdoor classrooms, curriculum, and programs. The working group should include teachers, outdoor educators, outdoor retailers (gear), the Vermont Agency of Education, the Vermont Department of Health, other relevant state agencies (including the Child Development Division of the Department for Children and Families), administrators, non-profits (Shelburne Farms, VT Afterschool, among others) and public land and parks managers. Assign a lead from the Agency of Education or other appropriate educational entity.
- The working group should create frameworks and guidance to support outdoor facilities, curriculum and activities both on school campuses and on local and close-by public lands
- Consideration for hybrid school plans should be given (mixed in-person and remote days)

**On-Campus Support:**

- Provide professional development and support to teachers for in-school days to encourage outdoor learning: embedding CORE curriculum in place-based outdoor learning.
- Mobilize CARES Act and other funding to provide schools with grants to buy or rent tents, create outdoor classroom/natural playgrounds and other outdoor learning facilities.
- Provide training and support for teachers for outdoor learning activities (Physical Education teachers, Science teachers, and all elementary classroom teachers): create low-barrier, low-risk options on school campuses and in nearby locales. Partner with parents, guides and other entities to provide instruction as needed.
- Provide all schools with access to a gear lending library (encourage community-based donations and outdoor industry donations/at-cost purchases or rentals).
- Partner with the outdoor industry to provide outdoor apparel for inclement weather for students who need it (or again, donations at the local level from other families).

**Off-Campus Support:**

Many districts are limiting in-person class to one or two days a week: having programs put on by other entities for outdoor/recreation and childcare will become essential for some families on the “off” days. Many of those programs can’t happen at schools as they usually would: afterschool/activity-based/sports and other programs provide before, after and vacation childcare for many school-age families, but with similar safety requirements to meet and high demand for space (especially with school buildings and their safety requirements), creative partnerships will need to form and/or strengthen. Extra childcare costs are going to become a given for many families (\$1000 per child per month for hybrid models based on 24 hours of care per week at \$10 per hour). Some families are forming ad hoc pods or paying for limited spaces in arts, outdoor and other programs: this approach will exacerbate inequities. A coordinated and financially supported approach is needed, especially for overwhelmed school districts.

- **Encourage and subsidize programming (through partnerships with local parks and recreation departments and other environmental education entities) for off-campus/remote days, which maintains classroom pods and provides outdoor education activities as well as needed childcare.** Allow students flexibility for off days to complete remote assignments. Formalize partnerships with these programs to provide meals, school materials, and library resources.
- Provide bicycles, helmets, and bike riding instruction to students in communities which have Safe Routes to Schools (partner with Local Motion and Rise VT), to increase transportation options both to and from school as well as between schools and outdoor classroom spaces/nearby parks as transportation is a significant barrier in some communities).
- Provide additional transportation to off-site locations to support outdoor, place-based learning and activities. Transportation is critical for most state lands access for schools.
- Encourage community partnerships and service-learning projects that connect students to the outdoors: examples include trail maintenance and building, lake monitoring, weather station monitoring, and science-based outdoor learning projects. State lands, other public lands, and privately owned forest lands could be used.
  - Create a template agreement for teachers/students to use with partners.
  - Create a directory of willing partners.
  - Provide financial support for transportation and gear.
  - Provide access to tool caches, monitoring tools and other necessary equipment

## Outdoor Recreation Stewardship:

As Vermonters and visitors continue to engage in outdoor recreation activities in high numbers, we are seeing not only experienced hikers, bikers and boaters but new or returning users to these activities. Overall, outdoor recreation will continue to require thoughtful stewardship and resources. CARES Act funds are being deployed for COVID response and recovery related to social distancing and repairing damage to infrastructure that has been damaged by increasing use. In addition, the steering committee recommends:

- Explore place-based revenue ideas that tie into participation (all the current/new consumers of bikes, boats, camping equipment - how can we encourage them to sustain their activities into a healthy lifestyle and how can they financially contribute to the recreation resources they enjoy?)
- Provide increased signage at recreation access points informing users about the organizations that create and maintain these areas
- Provide resources/funding for local trail managers that are experiencing high use
- Ensure there is no net loss in Vermont's fish stocking program

## Outdoor Recreation Business Support (Vermont Outdoor Business Alliance):

Current outdoor recreation business technical assistance and resources are serving and need to be enhanced to support businesses in:

- securing financial relief
- bringing customers back in person or online
- bringing employees back and putting health precautions in place for storefront, facility or program
- expanding e-commerce and consumer stimulus options
- securing product inventory/domestic manufacturing or reliable supply chains
- promoting safe recreation to residents and visitors
- supporting new populations in having positive experiences outdoors
- planning in the event of another wave

VOBA recommends that the Governor:

- Put a task force in place to inform policies/mandates to prevent the possibility of a future shutdown as well as plan for one to support preparation by businesses and nonprofits, curtailing of recreation options, and safety measures for Vermonters and visitors. This task force should look ahead to foliage season as well as ski season and anticipate the impacts to Vermont communities and recreational lands/waters if there is a shutdown or significant disruption. Example: if there is an impact to the "traditional" ski season, which closes some/all ski operators, backcountry trails will see massive and unprecedented impact.
- **Integrate a jobs program similar to what is being implemented in other states (Alaska, Utah) to hire unemployed and young Vermonters to move our shovel-ready projects, address maintenance and impact needs for infrastructure, expand the capacity of nonprofit partners, and put people to work in the outdoor industry.** The Great American Outdoors Act passed the House on July 22nd and if signed by the President would bring significant Land and Water Conservation Fund monies annually for Vermont's recreation and conservation projects. These funds could be used to enhance a jobs program, acquire and develop more lands for outdoor recreation, and support community-based recreation and economies.

## Municipal Outdoor Recreation Programs and Services:

Many municipalities are still struggling financially and are not eligible for much of the funding that has currently gone out. Municipal Parks and Recreation departments are providing essential functions such as childcare, food delivery, and managing outdoor spaces that help with mental and physical health during these challenging times, yet they are facing budget cuts, layoffs, and are being forced to do even more with less.

- Include municipalities as eligible entities for funding in the outdoor recreation sector
- Consider the role of municipal parks and recreation departments as providers of essential services in communities: encourage coordination and support among schools, parks and recreation departments, and other community service organizations (highlighting this in a few communities as a way to show gratitude and as examples)